



Pathogenic or health-promoting? How food is framed in healthy living media for women

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ABSTRACT

In this paper, I investigate the contribution of healthy living blogs to discourse about healthy eating, seeking to understand how blogs compare to mass-media magazine sources. This is done by comparatively analysing 459 healthy living blog posts and 141 health and fitness magazine articles. These were collected between 2011 and 2013 and provide rich data about what food content looks like in media designed for an audience of American women. I analyze how each source establishes the purpose of healthy eating and what foods are considered part of a healthy diet. While both sites are embedded in an overarching discourse of healthy eating, there are important contrasts between the frames used and ideologies they draw from. The magazines largely frame food as pathogenic, emphasizing food's connection to overweight/obesity, positioning particular foods ('scapegoat foods') as related to weight gain, and encouraging restriction of these foods. In contrast, the blogs predominantly frame food as "salutogenic" meaning that it is capable of promoting health and wellbeing. The blogs position food as a conduit for pleasure and an inclusive, varied diet is modelled. The pathogenic frame in the magazines reflects values inherent to hegemonic anti-obesity ideology while the salutogenic frame in blogs reflects a Health at Every Size® ideology. This paper argues that healthy living bloggers are able to broaden the range of mainstream healthy eating discourses, albeit without critiquing the moralization of health or thinness, because of their race, class and body privilege.

1. Introduction

Advice about what to eat in order to be healthy can be confusing and contradictory. In order to make sense of messages about healthy eating, women are increasingly sidelining traditional media, such as magazines and television shows, and instead seeking diet and nutrition advice online (Fox and Duggan, 2013; Fox and Jones, 2009). Online health advice is not necessarily the dominion of medical professionals. Everyday people are also creating health-related content and providing first-person advice to those browsing the web. An example of this is found in healthy living blogs (HLBs), sites that contain first-person narratives typically written by women for the purpose of documenting their personal health projects through posting daily commentary (sometimes multiple posts per day) about their food intake and fitness pursuits.

Nutrition scholars suggest that HLBs and other food diary-style blogs demonstrate the kinds of dietary restraint that are associated with maintaining an idealized thinness and even disordered eating (Boepple and Thompson, 2014; Lynch, 2010a, 2010b). This is similar to how health and fitness magazines, the print precursor to HLBs, valorize

thinness and equate it with health (Dworkin and Wachs, 2009; Duncan, 1994). However, while the magazine industry is organized around a historical relationship to the weight loss industry (Poulton, 2012), HLB content is produced by amateur content producers and may offer the potential to transform or rework dominant health discourses about health, obesity, and thinness.

In this paper, I compare how women's HLBs (a recent form of online media) and women's health and fitness magazines (a more traditional form of print media) represent food, a central preoccupation in the "obesity epidemic" (Lupton, 2012; Oliver, 2006). In particular, I ask whether the "democratisation" of media production, wherein anyone can produce professional-quality media content online, leads to food choices and practices being framed differently. To answer these questions, I conduct a frame analysis of influential health and fitness magazines and HLBs, focusing on: 1) how the purpose of healthy eating is established; and 2) what foods are considered part of a healthy diet.

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2. Theoretical framework and literature review

2.1. Healthy eating discourse

Contemporary healthy-eating discourse implies a connection between food and health, the need to think about health when making food choices, and a dichotomy between healthy/unhealthy foods (McPhail et al., 2011; Paquette, 2005). Mainstream understandings of healthy eating reflect important cultural values within a neoliberal context in which people are compelled to manage their personal health, including being disciplined about what they eat, in order to demonstrate successful citizenship (Crawford, 2006; Guthman, 2009). Crawford (2006: 410) uses the term “healthism” to describe the increasing emphasis on individual behaviours, along with moralization of health and disease, that is seen in Western countries. Health has been elevated to the status of a “super-value,” because it is used as a proxy for moral worthiness, and thinness is taken as a sign that both health and responsible citizenship have been achieved (Crawford, 2006, p.410; King, 2013; Lupton, 2012; Oliver, 2006). Making proper (“healthy”) food choices as a consumer signifies moral worth and is also entangled with the work of producing the ideal body, an ideal based on thinness, heteronormativity, affluence and whiteness in Western countries (Cairns et al., 2010; Cairns and Johnston, 2015; Mears, 2010).

2.1.1. Health ideologies

There are two ideologies situated within healthy eating discourses that are relevant to this study: anti-obesity ideology and an alternative public health model called Health at Every Size® (HAES®). Anti-obesity ideology positions thinness as the only way to truly be healthy, while situating obesity and weight management as medical problems in spite of dubious evidence that all people who are clinically “overweight” experience adverse health effects (Guthman, 2009; Lupton, 2012; Oliver, 2006). This ideology is pervasive and encourages individually-based weight-loss plans, including restrictive diets and regimented exercise plans, as the solution to curing the “disease” of obesity (Lupton, 2012; Rich and Evans, 2005). Anti-obesity ideology dovetails with a “pathogenic” approach to health (Antonovsky, 1996) that involves identifying the source of disease, such as “obesogenic” foods (Lupton, 1998; Rousseau, 2015).

In contrast, the HAES® ideology presents an alternative paradigm for thinking about health that shifts the focus from weight-loss to health-promoting behaviours that are associated with the prevention of chronic disease, regardless of body size (Bacon, 2010; Burgard, 2009). HAES® principles, grounded in research suggesting that focusing on weight loss can lead to poor health outcomes, advocate the following: 1) weight inclusivity; 2) health enhancement; 3) respectful care; 4) eating for well-being; and 5) life-enhancing movement (ASDAH, 2017; Bacon, 2010). HAES® encourages health-promoting behaviours such as enjoyable movement, attending to spiritual and emotional needs, and improving access to health information (ASDAH, 2017). Food-related practices advocated by HAES® include eating for pleasure, trusting the body's hunger cues, and eschewing external regulation of eating through dieting. The HAES® principles also emphasize the paradigm's original goals of fighting weight discrimination and understanding how intersectional identities lead to different experiences of discrimination (ASDAH, 2017). While not on par with anti-obesity ideology in terms of pervasiveness, the HAES® approach provides a route to health that is grounded in the work of fat activists and health practitioners working against size discrimination (Burgard, 2009).

The HAES paradigm reflects a “salutogenic” approach to health that positions health as a continuum and focuses on “salutary” (health-promoting) behaviours (Antonovsky, 1979, 1996). Rather than interrogating individual lifestyles to search for the cause of ill-health, sociologist Aaron Antonovsky (1979, pp.184–85) identified “generalized resistance resources” that people or groups use to combat the effects of stress and encourage wellness (e.g., material resources such as food).

The “Salutogenesis Model of Health” points to socio-cultural and historical contexts as the origin of these resources that become mechanisms to support health and wellbeing (Antonovsky, 1979).

2.2. Healthy living media

Until very recently, women's magazines had a prominent role in circulating particular kinds of knowledge about bodies, health and femininity. Scholarly analysis of health and fitness magazines for women reveals that these media reinforce a narrow view of ideal (thin) femininity and a veneration of extremely low levels of body fat through body discipline (Dworkin and Wachs, 2009; Duncan, 1994; Markula, 2001). Feminine bodies that do not conform to ideal standards are positioned as flawed and in need of help from scientific and medical experts (Duncan, 1994; Markula, 2001). Analysis of food discourse in these magazines is scant but suggests that diet recommendations in health and fitness magazines emphasize eating for weight(fat) loss; eating is presented “not as a normal bodily desire but as original sin, about which one may develop a guilty conscience” (Duncan, 1994, p.59; Dworkin and Wachs, 2009).

Production logics govern the content that is produced in these media. Mainstream magazines are owned by major mass media companies (e.g., Condé Nast, Meredith Corp., American Media) that follow industry routines including a dependence on corporate advertising for revenue and a focus on constructing idealized consumer lifestyles that are in line with the advertising dollars they want to attract (Duffy, 2013; Gough-Yates, 2003). Women's mainstream health and fitness magazines represent a corporatized form of discourse production that draws on a series of hegemonic discourses intertwined with the multi-billion dollar weight-loss industry (Gough-Yates, 2003; Oliver, 2006; Poulton, 2012).

In contrast to health and fitness magazines a typical HLB is created by a single blogger who photographs and narrates her food and exercise habits. Some blogs are produced as a hobby and do not generate income but others (such as those analyzed in this paper) are a financially-lucrative pursuit from which bloggers receive millions of pageviews and thousands of dollars in advertising and sponsorship revenue (Drummond, 2010; Talty, 2016). In terms of scope, there are over 2500 members of the online Healthy Living Blogs community, a networking group for bloggers who are predominantly white, heterosexual, educated women in their 20s and 30s. The most popular of these blogs have existed for almost a decade.

HLBs have been studied by nutrition scholars who argue that HLBs demonstrate “dietary restraint,” an ongoing process of reducing the variety and quantity of food eaten (Boepple and Thompson, 2014; Lynch, 2010a, 2010b). This research finds that bloggers' narratives are associated with disordered eating, for example: labelling indulgent foods as “dangerous”; limiting consumption of particular foods/food groups; expressing body dissatisfaction; sharing negative or guilt-inducing messages about food; and compensating for overeating through exercising (Boepple and Thompson, 2014; Lynch, 2010a; 2010b). In this way, food content in both HLBs and health and fitness magazines seems to overlap in ways related to body discontent, food restriction and fear of fat. However, systematic analysis of food discourses in the most popular and prototypical HLBs has not been conducted.

The entry of everyday people creating content food content in online forums has been described as enabling a “democratisation” of status by “professional amateurs” (Rousseau, 2015; Vincent, 2014, p.6). Healthy living bloggers may have the potential to resist hegemonic healthy ideology because, like other amateur producers, they generally give their products away for free and are not beholden to capitalist or corporate agendas (Ritzer and Jurgenson, 2010). With the entrance of these amateurs into the production of healthy living media, does the conversation around healthy eating change? Nascent research on bloggers who follow high-fat, low-carbohydrate diets provides an example of how bloggers are reframing health discourse by eschewing

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